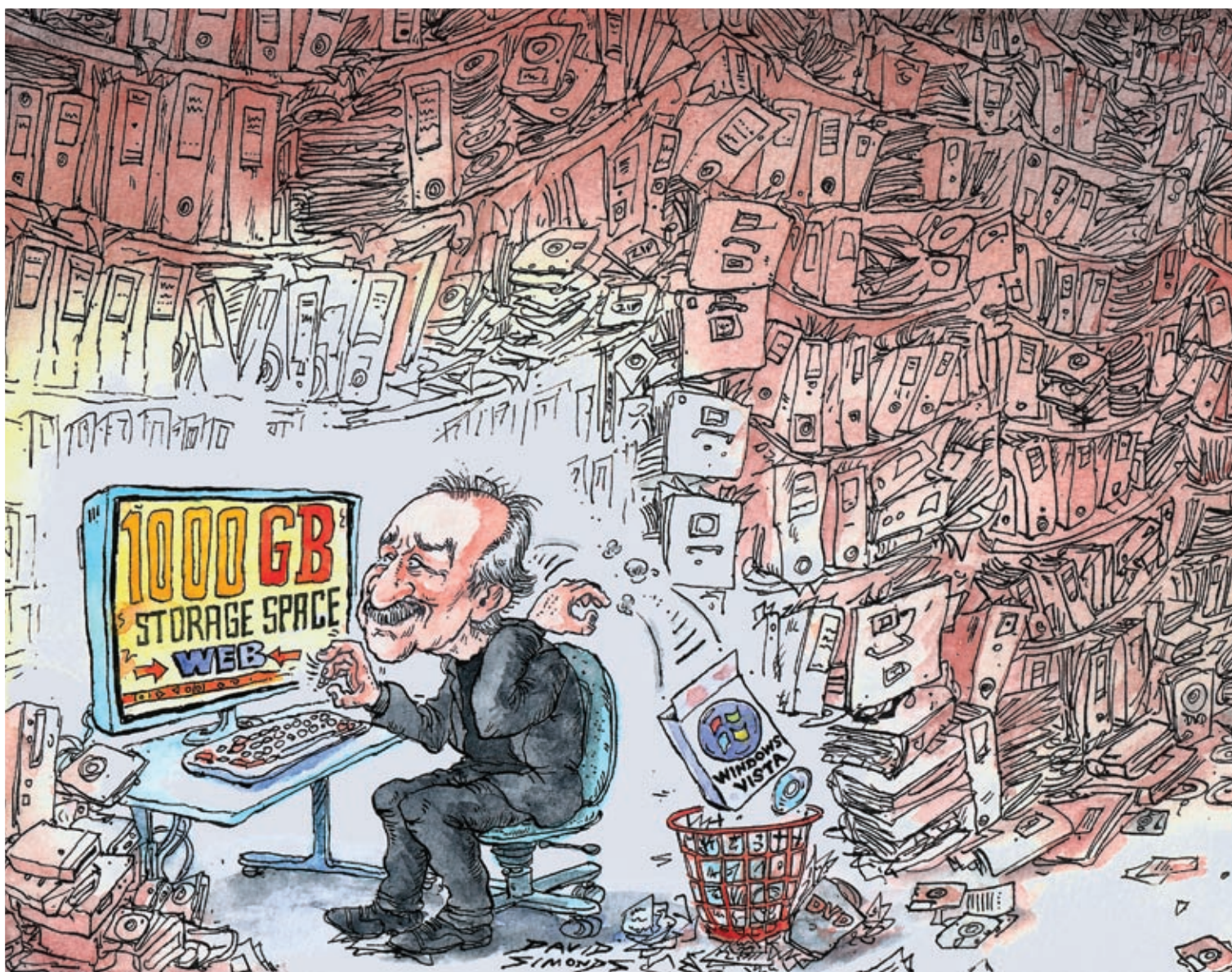




RANTS & RAVES

Mel Croucher has seen the future, and it has no place for Windows Vista. Simon Edwards has also had a glimpse of things to come on his TV screen – and he doesn't like the look of it

CATHARSIS



MEL CROUCHER RAVES

Windows Vista? Ha! I don't want it, I don't need it, and you can jolly well stuff it. Something wonderful has happened with my attitude towards computing, and I'm skipping towards the future with two fingers raised and wiggly. My catharsis heralds a breakthrough in the way we store and access data, and it marks the beginning of the end for desktop computers running dopey operating systems. For me

the revolution had been unseen and unsung until my youngest colleague, the flame-haired Erin, emailed me a 50MB file, which my inbox struggled with and I managed to screw up. "No problem," breezed Erin, "pick it up again off the web." Huh?

I discovered there are dozens of web-based services offering gigabytes of free storage, where 50MB file transfers are the norm, and where Erin archives everything. Main players such as Yahoo! Briefcase look downright stingy with only 25MB of space to store, access and share, but the harbinger

of death for clunky personal computers that run silly operating systems such as Windows is Google. Let us shout the news from the rooftops.

SPACE COWBOYS

Google's Gmail service provides a hefty 2.8GB of free server space to play with. The Google philosophy declares: "Do not sort, never throw anything away, you should never have to delete." This should send shivers down the spines of old farts like me. We spend large chunks of our lives deleting, organising and

archiving data, because we were brought up in the age of the nib and inkwell, surrounded by shelves groaning under the weight of box files. If I had not regularly purged my paper mountain, I would have run out of living space years ago.

But anyone brought up in the computer age regards me as an anal retentive, and they are quite right. They also think I'm sad, and possibly mad, when I fret about being separated from my desktop and notebook hard disks, and my backup drives, and my backup backups on CD, DVD, memory stick and – yes, I admit it – shelves full of box files, just in case.

I like young Erin. I like all young people. They teach me things. They've taught me that if you send Word documents, Excel spreadsheets or graphics files as attachments using Gmail, they get stored safe and sound on remote servers that are infinitely more secure than anything I've got. What's more, any file can be published on the web with its very



own URL, which means I can access it from any location, using any internet connection. And I can share it with anybody else for collaboration, illumination and dissemination.

BROWSE ABOUT THAT

Do you see where this is heading? That's right, I don't really need my bomb-proof desktop computer at all, I don't need to worry about backups, and I certainly don't need to shell out for horrors such as Windows Vista because there are great browser-based utilities out there that can handle everything. All I need is a free web browser and a connection.

In the future, creation and manipulation of documents, utilities, audio, video and everything else that a computer does will be browser-based. Kids know this already and have absolutely no problem with it. As for me and you, relax and let go. The safest place for your data is also the cheapest to store

and simplest to access. It's called the web.

DON'T EVER CHANGE



**SIMON EDWARDS
RANTS**

Finding something useful on the internet used to be hard work. Long before Google came on the scene you had to navigate rubbish search engines, which became increasingly useless as they started to compromise on their search results to sell advertising. At one time the 'next big thing', designed to cut through the information overload and sponsored links, was the intelligent agent. These software programs were designed to scour the web for content you would be interested in and present it to you in one convenient load, at regular intervals. If you were interested in news about domestic computer technology you would program your agent to find relevant stories. So far, so good. But how boring.

Not only did you need to program these systems to understand your interests, as they rarely learned from your behaviour, but they also produced unhelpful results. That's not what made me suspicious of them, though. People's tastes change and their interests develop. If you take one lunch break to define your entire personality to a computer program you're going to get some boring content over the coming years.

The Fraunhofer Institute for Digital Media Technology, which to all intents and purposes created the MP3 technology for compressing music into small files, is working on a system that analyses the music that users download and searches the internet for similar music. The idea is to create a playlist of music that sounds like, well, the other music you already have.

If we had all stuck with the music genres that we enjoyed 20 years ago, few of us would have discovered the bands and styles that we currently have on our iPod/Walkman/phonograph. And while it can be fun to revisit the old cassette tape archive every so often, there's only so much Roger Whittaker a man can take.

NOT MUSH ON THE TELLY



**SIMON EDWARDS
RANTS**

TV used to be easy. You could veg out and guzzle whatever wine was being advertised between the five-minute segments of the usual

broadcasted crap, letting your mind turn slowly to comfortable, warm mush – Lindemans' Chardonnay flavour, perhaps. Now it's all interactive red buttons, personal digital video recording media centers (spelled the exciting American way) and menus of extra channels.

It's all about choice. You want extra text information? Need the lowdown on the behind-the-scenes action? You got it. Now you can choose from nearly one million times the amount of crap that you previously had at your fingertips. It's going to cost you some effort to consume it all, though. Pushing red buttons, navigating digital content, learning how to use on-screen channel selections and setting PVR recording schedules all cuts into valuable lounging and wine-glass-tilting time. And how long will it be before hoards of foul, obese creatures start crawling into casualty with remote-control carpal tunnel syndrome?

It all sounds a bit too much like hard work to me, and for what? The same old rubbish, chopped up, riddled with adverts and repeated almost hourly throughout the day and night.

TELLY WOBBLES

If you have a normal TV and have not yet bothered with a digital receiver, you may have noticed that telly is worse than it's ever been, since the days when the test card lasted until the late afternoon. Do you know why? It's because the new digital channels are starving for good programming and are sucking the creative energy and money from the old, has-been channels. The brains and wallets are now working with the 'cool' and interactive set of channels that foolhardy early adopters have flocked to, with their oh-so clever digital TV receivers and their shiny, thin HD TVs (that don't work properly yet unless you have Sky or cable).

When there's nothing on the box, save for a new series of *Hate Your Neighbour's Cat* or *Ballroom Celebrity Fight Club On Ice*, then you should take a minute to imagine these early adopters/entertainment slaves flopping around on their leather sofas, stabbing blindly away at their enormous remote controls, eyes focused on what is now essentially another PC monitor in their computer-saturated lives. Are they being entertained as they search for something to watch in an ocean of awfulness? Or are they being ripped off? Don't envy them their high-tech home entertainment systems. Pity their

desperate, empty souls, nursed with poisonous, calorie-free TV.

OFF-PEAK LIMITS

Some OK stuff is still being broadcast, but not at any hour of the day that you or I are going to watch it. I think (and this entire rant is based loosely on what I think, rather than anything so pedestrian as proper, established fact) that the broadcasters now assume everyone owns some form of easily programmable, probably digital, video recorder. This means it's absolutely fine for them to plop out some horrible reality degradation during peak times and schedule a decent film for no earlier than 10.30pm on a Tuesday night. They are assuming that we are going to tape the film and watch it another evening, at peak time, when they are straining out yet more graphic indecency to demonstrate how privileged, developed-world citizens are incapable of feeding themselves, looking after their children or being generally civil to each other.

Applying a personal video recorder to the problem doesn't really solve anything, though. As decent programmes become spread over hundreds of channels, you find yourself scouring the electronic programming guide (EPG) for something half-good. You won't find it, but you will settle for a re-run of *ER* or a bunch of half-arsed documentaries that promise to uncover the real truth behind the mysteries surrounding the Aztecs/Pharaohs/Essex wives.

The only mystery these programs will solve, however, is how it is possible to fill an hour of airtime with repeated cut-scenes and narration along the lines of, "After the break [the fourth in 20 minutes], we'll find out whether there's any truth at all in what we've just been telling you, or whether it's all been lies". After the break, you will then hear more narration summarising everything from the previous section, plus some more cut-scenes, followed by more empty promises of enlightenment that will come your way after the next break. And you will record this and lump it because the alternative is not worth contemplating.

We are spoilt for choice, and spoilt by choice. TV has always been rubbish, but now we can fool ourselves that it's our fault – if only we had spent more time searching out the pearls from the pig shit. But there aren't any pearls. Or are there? Find out the *real* truth about TV programming after the break. In next month's *Rants & Raves*: something about computers. **ES**